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## Editorial: Dialogue and Communication in Film

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## Abstract

This editorial for a special themed issue of *JOMEK Journal* gives an overview of the issue contents and introduces the articles, written by Kyle Barrowman, Paul Bowman, Paolo Braga, Evelina Kazakeviciute, Naz Önen and David Sorfa. The issue presents new research and developments relating to the relatively underrepresented areas of dialogue and communication in film. Half of the texts discussed here are language-centred readings of films focused on dialogue; the other half pay particular attention to the representation of different levels of communication, such as speech and writing or intra-communication on screen. It also touches upon broader topics, such as film as a means of communication between the director and the audience. The authors approach their objects of analysis from a variety of perspectives – from ordinary language philosophy to deconstruction. The findings of their studies have both theoretical and practical value: among other discoveries, the authors came up with new critical tools for the analysis of dialogue and communication in film and valuable ideas on how film dialogue can contribute to the movie dramaturgically. Therefore, the research published in this issue might be relevant and of use to dialogue and communication scholars, screenwriters, and filmmakers.

## Contributor Note

Evelina Kazakeviciute is a PhD student in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture (JOMEK) at Cardiff University. Her thesis is entitled 'The Poststructuralist Conception of Communication as Reflected in Jim Jarmusch's Films'. She is the Coordinator of the Interdisciplinary Film and Visual Culture Research (IFVCR) Network and an editor of *JOMEK Journal*. Her areas of interest are communication theory, the philosophy of communication, poststructuralism, and film.

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This issue would not have seen the light of day if it were not for the conference ‘You talkin’ to me?: Dialogue and Communication in Film’, that was hosted by the Interdisciplinary Film and Visual Culture Research (IFVCR) Network at Cardiff University,<sup>1</sup> School of Journalism, Media and Culture (JOMEC) a couple of years ago.<sup>2</sup> The conference gathered our colleagues from Cardiff University and scholars from different countries and continents, from Europe to South America, to present new research and developments relating to the relatively underrepresented areas of dialogue and communication in film. It would have been a great loss if elaborate versions of the papers of excellent quality had not been published. I am glad that the best of them found home in this issue.

As one of the contributors to the issue, Paolo Braga, rightly observes, ‘Cinematographic dialogue is a research field still quite unexplored’ (Braga 2019, 51). Except for several notable contributions to it made by Sarah R. Kozloff (2000), Jeff Jaeckle (2013), and Braga (2015) himself, very few scholars<sup>3</sup> have devoted their work to the analysis of dialogue in film. Communication in film, being a broader area, has also been scarcely investigated. However, several studies are worth mentioning. Ned

Schantz’s (2008) research focused on different modes of communication between female characters in film (gossip, letters, and phones). Elibeth Monk-Turner et al. (2014) researched how communication technology is portrayed in film and how this differs in terms of gender and time. A collection of essays edited by Andrea Sabbadini, Ilany Kogan and Paola Golinelli (2018) looked at virtual Intimacy and communication in film from a psychoanalytic perspective. However, needless to say a number of questions regarding dialogue and communication in film remain unaddressed.

Half of the texts discussed in this issue are language-centred readings of films focused on dialogue; the other half pays particular attention to the representation of different levels of communication, such as speech and writing or intra-communication on screen. It also touches upon other topics, such as film as a means of communication between the director and the audience. I was happy to learn that the scholars and the essays themselves keep talking throughout the whole issue. The contributors to it addressed the questions raised during the conference and took into account the comments offered by their colleagues. Some ideas echo from one essay to another in accord; the others create tensions. The authors approach their objects of analysis from different and competing methodological perspectives – from ordinary language philosophy to deconstruction.

<sup>1</sup> Officially, the conference was organised by me, but my colleague Dr Kyle Barrowman deserves the credit as well as the title of a co-organiser of the event. Without his tremendous help and enthusiastic support, the conference probably would not have happened at all.

<sup>3</sup> See Braga’s (2019) article on this issue for more references.



Barrowman's essay "English, mother-fucker, do you speak it?" *Pulp Fiction* and the Future of Film-Philosophy' explores how films can do philosophy. More specifically, the author analyses how Tarantino does ordinary language philosophy and how the characters in *Pulp Fiction*, to paraphrase J.L. Austin, do things with words. Barrowman argues that Tarantino's dialogues in general, but those in his chosen film in particular, reflect the principles of argumentation as outlined by J.L. Austin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Stanley Cavell. The scholar focuses on the conversations between Vincent (John Travolta) and Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) and their famous foot massage argument, applying the concepts of 'projective imagination', 'explaining the syntactics', and 'demonstrating the semantics'. 'More than merely a convenient example to illustrate concepts in ordinary language philosophy', Barrowman contends, 'the foot massage argument in *Pulp Fiction* is equally a model of how to argue, of how to have a reasonable disagreement while at the same time preserving one's relationship with one's interlocutor' (Barrowman 2019, 18). Responding to the remarks on his paper expressed during the conference, Barrowman moves further to analyse such fundamental questions as what Film-Philosophy is, what its job is and what critical tools it has to do it with. After having suggested one of them, i.e. ordinary language philosophy for the study of dialogue and communication in film, Barrowman ends his article by saying that a great number of

conversations about conceptual and methodological issues are yet to take place.

A prominent scholar in martial arts studies, Paul Bowman, investigates the cinematic dialogue and the accounts on martial arts in non-martial arts films. According to the author, a glimpse at such films and a particular focus on audiovisual representation of martial arts can help us understand the status of martial arts in popular culture. After examining more than a dozen non-martial arts films in which the characters mention or talk about martial arts, including *Vision Quest/Crazy for You* (1985), *Lolita* (1962) and *Roustabout* (1964), to mention but a few, Bowman finds that the discursive status of martial arts is uncanny. The study concludes that, although martial arts sometimes have positive connotations, they are more often reputed to be comic or perverse aberrations from the norm. Such treatment, according to the author, is related to the fact that 'unless martial arts training happens in childhood, at the start of the process, the aspirant, desiring martial artist can appear ridiculous – whether "funny peculiar" or "funny ha-ha"' (Bowman 2019, 46). Bowman speculates that this is so because martial arts have 'a kind of originary lack inscribed in their heart' and the aspiration to practice it is an indicator of 'the presence and workings of lack, desire, insecurity, and incompleteness' (ibid.).

Braga (2019) explores the phenomenon of subtext in film dialogue. Drawing on the principles of the narrative theories developed by Robert McKee (1998), John Truby (2007), Dara Marks (2006), and Chris Vogler (1992), the scholar creates a map showing the main types of subtexts, depending on two sets of criteria that the author refers to as coordinates of his map: a) whether the subtext is to be found in the flaws of the protagonist or in a hidden agenda he has; and b) whether or not the subtext is shared by the characters involved in the scene. The author claims that 'knowing the four types of subtext, finding their recurrence in movies, contributes to developing the phenomenology of the experience of vision' (Braga 2019, 64). The helpful simplicity and clarity of the map along with the illustrative examples of each type of subtext drawn from a number of well-known films, such as *Schindler's List* (1993), *The Godfather* (1972), *Life is Beautiful* (1997) or *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), leaves no room for indistinctiveness. Braga's essay contributes to the study of film dialogue and might be of interest not only to the scholars in the field, but also to practicing screenwriters.

My article explores Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) in light of Jacques Derrida's observations on the axiological binary opposition of speech and writing. I contend that that the relationship between the written and the spoken word is artistically explored in the opening scene where the accountant William Blake (Johnny Depp) meets the fireman (Crispin Glover) on the train to

the town of Machine. I interpret Depp's protagonist as the representative of writing and Glover's fireman as the representative of speech. Since the fireman's appearance in the film is episodic, I focus on the main character. Demonstrating how the attributes that, through the long history of Western metaphysics, have been ascribed to writing are manifested by him, I analyse a subtle personification of the written word on screen. I claim that *Dead Man* is a deconstructive text not only because it deconstructs the genre of the Western and the narrative of the West, but also because it offers a critique of logocentrism and Western metaphysics. I end my article by considering the validity of such interpretation and raising yet unanswered questions regarding the act of interpretation. Perhaps, I suggest, we should stop asking the author what the text means and start asking the text itself.

Naz Önen's essay is a notable contribution to the analysis of a relatively unexplored genre of the Essay Film, balancing between documentary and fiction. In her work the author, herself a filmmaker who has also worked on several essay films, points out the features of the Essay Film and focuses on the dialogical characteristics of this unique film practice. Providing the reader with helpful examples from the films by Agnès Varda, Angela Melitopoulos, and Wim Wenders, to name a few, she persuasively argues that through the use of voice-over as an intellectual tool as well as through what she calls 'the right combinations' in editing, the essayist invites the viewer for a communicative and collective experience. In other words,

engages her in conversation, especially on what the meaning of the film is. 'The meaning in the essay film', she writes, 'is not delivered to the viewer directly; rather it is opened up for a collective act, with a dialogical attitude' (Önen 2019, 101).

Point of departure of David Sorfa's essay is that, unlike literature, cinema fails to represent inner-speech and thought. The author focuses on, as he argues, unsuccessful cinematic technique that he labels as 'first-person camera' or 'first-person' film. It is a technique whereby the camera not only represents a character's perspective but is supposed to be understood as a subjective view of that character throughout the whole film (*Lady in the Lake* [1947] and *Dark Passage* [1947] are the exemplary cases the author chooses to examine). Sorfa believes that the issue of the success or failure of the technique is not really a technological problem but rather a narratological and philosophical one. The scholar therefore applies Derrida's critique of Husserl's idea of 'hearing oneself speak' to examine the phenomenon. He also assesses the impact of such phenomenon on a homunculus theory of mind. According to Sorfa, first-person camera attempts to place us as homunculi in the mind of the character. However, it fails for one of the two reasons: 'because the homunculus theory is logically flawed at the outset, or because it reveals the unwelcome truth that we do not really know what or who we are when we think or talk' (Sorfa

2019, 108). The scholar concludes that the first-person camera can only offer the fantasy of 'hearing oneself speak', but constantly reminds us it's only a fantasy.

As one can see from the summaries above, the areas of dialogue and communication in film can still generate fruitful discussions, bring up new questions and prompt innovative answers. One of the reasons why they have not received the attention they truly deserve might be the risk of such analysis. By focusing on cinematic dialogue, film scholars, as Kyle Barrowman outlines in his essay (Barrowman 2019, 18), risk reducing film to literature (or receiving criticism for supposedly doing so), whereas communication scholars risk stepping over the boundaries of communication studies (or, again, receiving criticism for supposedly doing so).

However, film dialogue deserves to be an object of study in its own right, especially bearing in mind that 'for the most part analysts incorporate the information provided by a film's dialogue and overlook the dialogue as signifier' (Kozloff 2000, 6). Kozloff rightly observes that 'To overlook the dialogue is to miss the heart of the film' (Kozloff 2013, xiv). If we refuse to take dialogue under the scope of our analysis, our understanding of films will suffer from it. Furthermore, as this issue but especially Bowman's essay demonstrates, by carefully studying cinematic dialogue, we can learn about the discourse of certain phenomenon,

and it can speak volumes about its status in popular culture.

Filmic speech, of course, has quite a few deformations from a real everyday conversation<sup>4</sup>; it is, nevertheless, a good source to study human communication. While watching films, we can learn how to communicate: how to talk to one another, how to argue, how to listen and read the faces of our interlocutors more attentively – as if they were characters in a movie. Films can help us teach communication theories more effectively (on how films can be used as instructional resources in interpersonal communication courses, see Proctor [2009]). But it can also help us theorise communication.

One must acknowledge the social-ideological value of film and its endless possibilities to display the premonitory symptoms of contemporary world. Perhaps one could even go so far as to say that at least some tensions and problems we experience nowadays can manifest themselves and be captured only in the realm of the imaginary. Jeffrey St. John, for example, argues that literature, and William Gaddis novels specifically, ‘shine on communication a light... that reveals how imaginative confrontation with the realities of failure may strengthen our understanding of why, and with what effects, humans do or do not communicate with one another’ (John 2006, 250). In a similar manner, I believe, film can signal and

record the problems of communication we encounter in our everyday lives. If we looked at film in such a way, it might turn out to be a good material for better understanding the process of communication.

Throughout the history of film studies, we focused too much on the language *of* cinema and forgot the language *in* cinema; we analysed film *as* communication, but not communication *in* film. This issue on language-centred readings of films hopes to encourage scholars working in the areas of dialogue and communication in film to resume the dialogue on these topics in the near future. As the essays published here show, we still have much to talk about.

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<sup>4</sup> For the discussion of these deformations, see Kozloff [2000, 16].



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## Filmography

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*Dead Man*. 1995. Directed by Jim Jarmusch. Miramax Films.

*Lady in the Lake*. 1947. Directed by Robert Montgomery. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

*Lolita*. 1962. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

*Pulp Fiction*. 1994. Directed by Quentin Tarantino. Miramax Films.

*Roustabout*. 1964. Directed by John Rich. Hal Wallis Productions. Paramount Pictures.

*Vision Quest/Crazy for You*. 1985. Directed by Harold Becker. Warner Bros.

*Schindler's List*. 1993. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Amblin Entertainment. Universal Pictures.

*The Godfather*. 1972. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures and Alfran Productions. Paramount Pictures.

*Life Is Beautiful*. 1997. Directed by Roberto Benigni. Cecchi Gori Group. Miramax Films.

*Mad Max: Fury Road*. 2015. Directed by George Miller. Village Roadshow Pictures, Kennedy Miller Mitchell, and RatPac-Dune Entertainment. Warner Bros and Roadshow Films.



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